

**A fictional conversation on surveilled bodies made
out of fragments from recorded conversations**

Adrian Bridget

1. [SURVEILLANCE—a word somewhat disregarded by the translators of Foucault, whose book *Surveiller et punir* is known in the English-speaking world as *Discipline and Punish*. There is, indeed, a method or a discipline to the Peeping Brother's madness. But 'discipline' is not enough; it doesn't describe what is at stake. TO SURVEIL. Like that, imperative, in all capitals: no looking away.]

K: They are ahead of you. That's the feeling you get—the existence of something invisible, eyes without faces. And they are watching you, too.

A: The educated gaze, as you call it, is the gaze that is conscious of itself.

K: That is a very big part of it. And being conscious of the fact that reality—the way it presents itself—might not be objective.

W: Orwell says that political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.

A: I want to compose a sort of play script so no one has the role of mediator. Three equals. But, at the same time, this isn't a real conversation. There is a kind of invisible agency here, which I guess is also appropriate.

K: It has happened to be this way. A lot of political propaganda that has been escalating in the past twenty years, specifically in Russia, has been done on television and the internet has become a place of resistance. But it's also unreliable.

W: People can be easily tricked into extreme behaviour, unhealthy power structures. Often the misuse of language plays an important part in it. The combination of a lack of transparency concerning true intentions and the abuse of language by the ones in power can lead to horrific consequences.

A: You can never NOT be a performer. The least you can be is an unaware performer. That's where the danger comes in. But as soon as you become conscious of yourself...

K: It's a way of resistance.

A: There is a difference between protest and resistance.

K: Resistance can be achieved with minimal means.

W: A proof of our existence.

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2. [*Der gläserne Mensch ist der zerbrochene Mensch ist der ideale Mensch ist der verstümmelte Mensch ist der körperlose Mensch ist der wissenschaftliche Mensch ist der kapitalistische Mensch ist der ausgewertete Mensch ist der maßlose Mensch ist der akzeptierte Mensch ist der geistliche Mensch usw. Es werde Durchleuchtung!* 'The term *Gläserner Mensch* is mainly employed as a metaphor in the field of data

protection. It stands for the negative perception of an overseeing state's intense scrutiny (*Durchleuchtung*) of people and their behaviour. This concept was first used in Germany in 1982, during discussions on the Census Law. Since then, it has become a symbol for the unrestrained and invasive collection of personal data by public and private institutions, as well as their retention.' Translated from [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gl%C3%A4serner_Mensch_\(Datenschutz\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gl%C3%A4serner_Mensch_(Datenschutz)), accessed 21 November 2020.]

W: I feel like a portrait is doomed to fail.

A: The human body disappears in the institutional body. In Foucault, you have the theatricality of executions pre-modern prison, in which the body was very much present, and then the body itself disappears. Surveillance technology and data, even though historically recent, are just natural consequences of this earlier shift.

W: Lately, I have been reading on psychosocial experiments in history—like the famous Milgram Experiment, in which subjects were observed to obey authority figures even if in conflict with their personal conscience. I am reading about cognitive dissonance, mass hysteria.

K: Russia is known for being quite open about the use of something called political technology.

A: A body of professionals.

K: And in a lot of the techniques that are used, they use the absurd, literally from Camus' books, they use that. Presenting reality as something absurd and therefore taking away from personal experiences, taking away from the body.

A: There is a parallel between going from the human body to the institutional body and going from the proscenium arch to living in a constant theatre. It is the loss of the possibility of measuring, of human proportion.

W: It reminds me of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, page 145. 'No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.'

K: A key point here is staging.

W: All recognisable elements in my paintings are staged. They are actors but I like to refer to them as 'tools'. (I love Lee Lozano's Tool Paintings.) It might be a little insulting to say that Orwell is one of such 'tools', just like the bananas are in my earlier still life paintings. But I think that is true. These staged elements are the small percentage of rational thought present in my work. A much larger percentage is the direct and intuitive expression of energy, of the urge to exist, to create. An object, shape or form is subjected to that.

K: I see my work more as an installation but I guess the way it will be presented is more sculpture-like. Individual objects. This is where it is; this is where it stands. And for me this is very theatrical, in a sense. With historical punishments happening at allocated places, it is established that, for a period of time, the market square or a square next to the city

hall has become the stage for just that observation. And with sculpture, when it is in place, the space around it becomes a space for looking at the object.

- A: The theatre of punishment pre-modern prison and the theatre of sculpture. The space of painting and the space that painting provokes are often framed, too.
- W: I look at art in the same way I look at theatre. The visual impact of paint in itself is the direct expression of a human; it is the extension of a human.
- K: And that constant thought that what is happening is staged in a way, and not by you, is fascinating.

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3. [A body with a view, a body that offers itself to sight. Flesh, brushstrokes, breakable glass. The opaque body resists the logic of discourse, the organisation of data. It is unclassifiable material. The thing-body is useless. It isn't capital. It resists capital, survives capital punishment because it is mortal, because of its blood, organs, lived tissues. It is evidence of the vulnerability of a system that, as soon as the body exceeds the abstraction of economy, in order to guard the public's suspension of disbelief, needs to bring down the curtains.]

A: A hypothetical example, a bit of an odd image: a work on its own, in the gallery, in the dark, as a thing.

K: I also allow it to exist out of context.

A: It's interesting that you said 'allow'.

K: There are a lot of control relationships between the maker and the object, physical or not, when interpretation is allowed. And a lot of anxiety placed on interpreting the artwork correctly, which for me is not how reality works.

W: Nothing is determined. Painting is another language. It allows for ambiguity, different layers of interpretation, elements that need to be discovered by reading between the lines, by looking through the facade.

A: In a way, what distinguishes art from certain strands of politics, or from other fields in society, is exactly the freedom of interpretation that comes with it. At the same time, there is the fear of what interpretation can entail if it goes "wrong". Precisely for having this freedom, the artwork can be appropriated by non-democratic sources. If you define the work in advance, however, you are also employing an authoritarian language, which, indirectly, reinforces figures of authority.

W: I didn't paint 'bad pigs', for example. Instead of directly referencing the role of pigs in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which, once in power, they suppress and exploit other animals, I painted pigs with vulnerability. There is a duality here. I painted them and named them Eric and Arthur—the first and middle names of Orwell's birth name. I painted them with the understanding that almost anyone can become a 'bad pig' if

conditioned in a certain way and under a given set of circumstances.

- K: Viewing is not neutral. There is a relationship of power in looking. A lot of my works are about how the citizens of the state are seen. The gaze of power. At the same time, it's really crucial not to underestimate the power of looking back. Especially if we are talking about more and more opaque bodies, bodies that employ the educated gaze as a weapon, as a tool for living through an authoritarian regime.
- W: There is always a contemplation and projection that is essentially very human. I'm not interested in having a portrait look like the portrayed, finding the right colour for Orwell's cheeks, for example. It is all so distracting. It breaks the rhythm of painting. It makes no sense to me to paint skin on a surface that I consider to already be skin.
- A: Protest comes from resistance being threatened. It seems that art precedes this threat. It can be made within the shadow cast by threat but it always exceeds the reaction to a threat.
- K: Everything about *The Wall* terrifies me.
- A: I am recording this conversation, by the way.
- K: *The Wall* is a machine, a weapon produced by the Kalashnikov factory, now a private company. A steel wall is mounted on a truck, which can be folded or unfolded when needed. It's designed to stop demonstrations, to stop presumably violent demonstrations. A state should serve its citizens. Why does it need to create machines to protect itself from them, or even to attack them? I came across it via an ad that Kalashnikov placed on YouTube. It's shot with wide-angle lenses, from a low angle. All the young men playing the MA soldiers (*ros gvardia*) in the ad are very fit, quite sexual. This video was made to be liked. But also to be feared. It is, in a sense, nightmarish. That's why I wanted to recreate it, to make it glass-like, transparent, fragile. Almost to be laughed at. Like what you do with a nightmare—to calm yourself down for a second.
- A: It seems that art, in some way, re-offers bodies to the public, bodies that were driven to the outskirts, to prisons, hospitals, slaughterhouses.
- W: The body is the painting and the painting is the body.
- A: And a characteristic of the body is its opacity. Opacity as resistance. The body's being there is opaque. Even if it is made of glass, it is not transparent.

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Adrian Bridget is a writer and translator. He holds an MA in Literary Studies from Goldsmiths, London. Recently published works include the short prose collection *TEXTS THAT SHOULDN'T BE READ OUT LOUD* and the novel *Treatment*. In 2015 his play *Don't Laugh at the Sunlight Upon Me* was performed at Dürst Britt & Mayhew, who in the same year also published Bridget's *The Scratch and other poems*. Adrian Bridget lives and works in London, UK.